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Dominic Annen

Western Oregon University, dominic.annen@gmail.com

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The Tricolor and the Union Jack at Sea: How the French Revolution Decapitated the French
Navy and Thereby Ruined Napoleon's Ambitions

By: Dominic Annen

Primary Reader: Dr. Patricia Goldsworthy-Bishop

Secondary Reader: Dr. David Doellinger

Seminar Instructor: Dr. John Rector

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Introduction

The French Navy was a powerful force during the Napoleonic Era, one that frightened the Royal Navy with its potential and remained a thorn in their side throughout the Napoleonic and French Revolutionary conflicts. The successes of the French Army took France to victory across the European continent, from Spain to Russia. In comparison to the army however, the navy has received much less attention. This is an unfortunate hole in the historical scholarship of the Napoleonic Wars, as the French Navy played a pivotal role in keeping Napoleon competitive and eventually contributed greatly to his downfall. Ultimately, the French Navy was overwhelmed by a number of factors and devastated at the Battle of Trafalgar. While economics, social changes, politics, and strategy all played a role in the downfall of the French Navy, the key factor was the loss of command experience and seamanship suffered by the navy after the fall of the aristocracy during the French Revolution.

The Development of the Revolution

The new era of political thought brought on by the ideals of the French Revolution, which began to develop in 1787, was one of the great contributing factors that brought down the French Navy. It espoused bringing down the present order and replacing it with something more democratic and by 14 July 1789 with the storming of the Bastille, the Revolution was well on its way toward removing the aristocracy. The new political reality brought down the aristocracy, and with it, forever changed the French Admiralty, which was made up primarily of the aristocratic class. The lost leadership became irreplaceable, and while some fine officers were to be found, they were no substitution for the old guard who had performed so well in the recent American Revolution. Furthermore, those officers who were raised to power were often

promoted based upon nebulous concepts of patriotism, and the new social forces that expounded the virtues of popular sovereignty and common will.¹

During the French Revolution, French politics were utterly disrupted and much of the leadership was displaced, if not eliminated. One of the first goals of the French Revolution was to even the playing field between France's three estates, or classes. This process began with the demands placed upon the King to give more privileges to the Third Estate. Faced with little choice but to agree, the King assented to a document called "The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen". This document defined a new political structure, in which the common citizen was to be given more freedom and authority. The first article declared that "Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social distinctions may only be based on common usefulness."²

Almost immediately, the falling position of the aristocracy damaged the French Navy's command structure. The idea that the common will was more important than the old aristocratic system created chaos in the ranks of the French Navy. Common will was the idea that the law should be an expression of the will of the people, and that they should all have an equal voice in creating it. The "Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen", of August 1789, declared that "All citizens, [are] equal in its eyes... without any distinction other than that of their virtues and their talents." This clearly challenged the position of those standing only on birth or wealth, which made the aristocracy the primary target.³

As a result of the ideals of the Declaration and the ideals of the Revolution, many of the officers who commanded warships did so only at the pleasure of their crews, and many times

¹ P.M. Jones. *The French Revolution, 1787-1804*. (London: Pearson, 2003) 29.

² "The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen." In *The French Revolution and Napoleon: A Sourcebook*. Dwyer, P. G. and P. McPhee, eds. (New York: Rutledge, 2002) 27

³ Ibid. 27.

were overthrown through mutiny and dissention. Furthermore, the idea of popular sovereignty meant that French warships were often run by committee, voting on what to do next rather than following the orders of an Admiral or Captain. An example of this occurred in September of 1793, when the French Atlantic Fleet mutinied in Quiberon Bay, ignoring the orders of the National Assembly and of Vice Admiral Morard de Galles. This idea of popular sovereignty was also inflamed by the economic problems faced by the French government, which only became more severe as the Revolution and Napoleonic conflicts continued on.⁴

The idea of common usefulness, or general will, became the defining message of the French Revolution. Article Six of the Declaration declared that “The law is the expression of the general will.”⁵ This is important because it contributed greatly to the problems that affected the French Revolutionary Navy. A society built on the idea of common sovereignty helped to break down military discipline and in many ways lead to things like mutiny and the elimination of much of the admiralty, as they were members of the aristocracy.

The August 1789 *Decrees on Feudalism* brought the aristocracy down further. It stated that all taxes and dues owed to the nobility were voided, and that property rights were no longer the result of privileged birth. The *Decrees* intensified the sentiments of the Revolution and stated that all men had equal right to ownership of land and title. The first sentence of its first article stated, “The National Assembly destroys the feudal regime completely.” In that effort, it was entirely successful.⁶

The leadership of the French Navy was made up largely of a privileged aristocracy. For this reason, they were widely distrusted by the French Revolutionaries. The French admirals

⁴ W. S. Cormack. “The French Navy and the Struggle for Revolutionary Authority: The Mutiny of the Brest Fleet in 1793.” *Canadian Journal of History*. No. 27 (Apr. 1992). 20.

⁵ “Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen”. 27.

⁶ “The August 1789 Decrees on Feudalism”. In *The French Revolution and Napoleon: A Sourcebook*. Dwyer, P.G. and Peter McPhee, eds. (London: Routledge, 2002): 24-26.

were dependent upon the aristocratic state for their positions and lives, and when that state began to change and collapse, so too did they. The admiralty had never been a despotic group; rather they worked to defend their workers and sailors, and by 1789 were working hard to reform the navy into an organization more in line with Revolutionary ideals. Still, the greatest effect of the French Revolution upon the French Navy, aside from ending the monarchy, was to undermine the traditional authority figures within the French Navy.⁷

As a result of the changes in the structures of authority was that mutiny became a nearly constant problem within the French Navy. Much of this had to do with the idea that serving in the French Navy was widely considered to be a punishment, akin to a prison sentence. This was only exacerbated by the Revolutionary government's efforts in 1790 to place actual prisoners on ships, in the hopes that the time spent as sailors might reform them. This made sailors feel as though they were no better than criminals, forced to work alongside those who had committed actual crimes.⁸

Even before the French Revolution, the demands for men and officers during the American Revolution brought many common men to the fore as officers. During the American Revolution they often served at intermediate grades, coming into command as the French Revolution progressed. They were not treated as equals among the officer corps, instead they were the second class of the naval hierarchy, and treated as outsiders and interlopers by those who remained of the old guard despite any skill they might have had. This discrimination only intensified the problems within the French Navy; the old guard despised their best replacements.⁹

⁷ W. S. Cormack. *Revolution & Political Conflict in the French Navy 1789-1794*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 18-19

⁸ Ibid. 28-29.

⁹ Ibid. 37-38

The final attack upon the aristocratic class by the Revolution came on 21 January 1793, when the Revolution ordered the execution of the King of France. The King had been stripped of his royal name and title, being referred to by the time of his trial only as Louis Capet rather than his royal name King Louis XVI. Before being beheaded the King made only one statement: “Men of France, I die innocent. I forgive all my enemies, and I wish that my death be useful to the people.” The death of the King ended any hopes the aristocracy may have had to recover their power, and lead directly to the wars that would plague Revolutionary and Napoleonic France for years to come. The response of the people was to celebrate the death of the “tyrant”.¹⁰

Other Failings

The French economy was intended to provide the resources for the efforts of both their army and navy. Their economy had been suffering for some time, and the policies of the French Revolutionary government and furthered that deficiency. Timber reserves were low and new sources were difficult to obtain with the omnipresent British blockade. The French were also forced to rely on taxation for funding, as much of their credit had been squandered by government policies from 1796 or earlier. Also, their reputation had been destroyed by their constant warfare, preventing them from seeking any kind of foreign aid or being trusted with loans and debt.¹¹

In terms of the conduct of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, the French also found their tactics and overall strategy lacking when compared to the Royal Navy. Most of the French fleet spent the conflicts behind a blockade, finding it difficult to escape to the open sea in meaningful numbers. When the French fleet did engage the British, they found their tactics

¹⁰ “Louis XVI’s Execution, 21 January 1793”. In *The French Revolution and Napoleon: A Sourcebook*. Dwyer, P.G. and Peter McPhee, eds. (London: Routledge, 2002): 76-77.

¹¹ M.D. Bordo and E.N. White. “A Tale of Two Currencies: British and French Finance During the Napoleonic Wars.” *The Journal of Economic History*. 51(2), (Jun. 1991) 303.

lacking as well, causing them to lose important engagements from the Nile to their final demise at the Battle of Trafalgar on 21 October, 1805.¹²

It should not be presumed from the above arguments that the French Navy was somehow incompetent or incapable. Much the opposite, they were a powerful and dangerous force. They simply found themselves unable to overcome all the forces arrayed against them. While Britain had problems of their own, they were not as crippling, and so the Royal Navy was able to out-compete the French, despite the earlier successes of the French Navy in conflicts like the American Revolution. The French Navy was tremendously important to the fall of Napoleon and to ending the Napoleonic Wars, it has been, sadly, overlooked in historical scholarship until recently.

The American Revolution

Before beginning an examination of the French Navy during the Napoleonic period, it is important to first step back and examine its performance in previous conflicts. In this case, a comparison to their performance during the American Revolution is called for. The comparison is important because it reinforces the idea that the French Navy was not an incompetent or incapable force, much the opposite, they were simply overwhelmed by the many forces arrayed against them, both on the battlefield and off.

French involvement in the American Revolution was brought about by a desire to weaken Britain's power in Europe by forcing them to focus their attention on the rebelling colonies. In pursuit of that objective, the French first provided secret aid to the American Colonies; later they escalated their involvement to direct intervention. There was simply too much to gain by

¹² Kristof, John J. "The Royal Navy's Defeat of the French at Sea in the Years 1793-1815." *Naval War College Review* 25, no. 4 (March 1973),

assisting the Americans in their War of Independence for the French to remain a neutral observer.¹³

The performance of the French Navy during the American Revolution was exceptional. Their victories during the American Revolution represent a change from the established norm of being defeated by the British. Between 1689 and 1815, the British and French fought seven wars, in each of these the British were triumphant, the exception was the American Revolution. Still, despite that trend, it is surprising that the French Navy was defeated so readily only a short few years after the American Revolution and their tremendous victory. They were finally establishing a new precedent of victory, only to have it taken away a few years later.¹⁴

Review of Literature

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the French Revolution is one of the most studied historical periods to have ever existed. In some ways this is beneficiary because it provides a wealth of historical perspectives and ideas, though it can make determining the focus of any inquiry more difficult. In general terms the study of the French Navy during the Revolutionary period has evolved greatly in recent scholarship, moving from a historical footnote to a more prominent position as an area worthy of its own direct study. The topic of the navy has received little attention as compared to the army, though there has been a great deal of scholarship, it tends to downplay the importance of the navy to the overall war effort.

The first question of concern in this examination requires a step back in time, to provide a basis for comparison between the French Navy in the Napoleonic period and other periods. This will help highlight the capabilities of the navy, and show that its loss was not something that was

¹³ E. S. Corwin. "The French Objective in the American Revolution". *The American Historical Review*. 21(1) (Oct. 1915) 36-37.

¹⁴ J. R. Dull. "Why Did the French Revolutionary Navy Fail?" *Consortium on Revolutionary Europe, 1750-1850*. Vol. 19 (June 1989) 121.

a foregone conclusion. In Edward S. Corwin's article "The French Objective in the American Revolution, Corwin examines not only the goals of the French Navy but also outlines their successes in the American Revolution. The navy was largely quite successful during the American Revolution and this makes it only seem stranger that they were so soundly defeated only a few years later.¹⁵

Literature concerning the French Navy during the Napoleonic period was sparse prior to the 1990s, but there were some important milestones. In the 1970s, study of the navy began to become more prolific. It was also at that point that the strong pro-British bias of earlier sources began to disappear. The book *The Age of Nelson* by G. J. Marcus is such an examination, and while it addresses the British more than the French, it is still important for comparative purposes, if nothing else. Marcus examines a number of topics relating to the navy, discussing some of the issues that frightened the aristocracy especially, like mutiny.¹⁶ He also discusses the commerce raiders and their continuing efforts even during times of peace.¹⁷

The bias previously mentioned continued to diminish in an article written by Commander John J. Kristof of the United States Navy. In 1973, Kristof wrote the article "The Royal Navy's Defeat of the French at Sea in the Years 1793-1815", Kristof examines the strategies and tactics of the British and French during the Revolutionary period. His examination was very important because it explored the French Navy as an important and independent entity, without the pro-British biases presented by previous sources. His argument makes clear that the French had used inferior tactical and strategic ideas, though those ideas were probably only poor in hindsight.¹⁸

¹⁵ E. S. Corwin. "The French Objective in the American Revolution". *The American Historical Review*. Vol. 21, No. 1 (Oct. 1915), 37

¹⁶ G. J. Marcus. *The Age of Nelson*. (New York: Viking Press, 1971) 82-84

¹⁷ Ibid. 105-7

¹⁸ J. J. Kristof, Cmdr. "The Royal Navy's Defeat of the French at Sea in the Years 1793-1815." *Naval War College Review*. Vol. 25, No. 4, (Mar. 1973), 45.

In examining the French Navy's failures, it is also necessary to examine one of the key results of the failures of leadership; that cause being the mutinies that made French commanders afraid to step on the quarterdecks of their ships. In "The French Navy and the Struggle for Revolutionary Authority: The Mutiny of the Brest Fleet in 1793", William S. Cormack examines the causes and results of one particular mutiny, which defines one of the great issues facing the French Navy. That issue was whether the power over the French Fleet should reside with the executive of the new Republic, or if it should reside with the commanding officers or individual sailors. According to Cormack, "When the Nation's Will ceased to be equated with ... the commanding officers, mutiny became unavoidable."¹⁹

Cormack's *Revolution & Political Conflict in the French Navy, 1789-1794*. This monograph builds on the argument made in the article mentioned above, and some material from that article is included in the book. In *Revolution*, Cormack explores the French Navy in great detail, and is the first to explore it as a unique entity, which is not in some way tied to the army or merely an extension of other concerns. Cormack examines the navy from the time just before the French Revolution, through Napoleon's rise to power; at that point he ends his examination and leaves a continuation to other historians. He also includes a historiography that mentions the lack of previous scholarship that directly addresses the French Navy.²⁰

The Line Upon a Wind: The Greatest War Fought at Sea Under Sail, a book by Noel Mostert is an examination of the later stages of the Napoleonic Wars. Mostert presents an argument similar to that of Cormack, that the topic of the navy had been largely ignored. Although, by Mostert's time of publication, 2008, more work had been done in bringing the navy

¹⁹ W. S. Cormack. "The French Navy and the Struggle for Revolutionary Authority: The Mutiny of the Brest Fleet in 1793". *Canadian Journal of History*. Vol. 27, (April 1992), 29

²⁰ W. S. Cormack. *Revolution & Political Conflict in the French Navy, 1789-1794*. (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1995), 1.

into a more prominent position. Mostert's book is incredibly long and detailed, and covers the period of time that Cormack missed, the Napoleonic Wars themselves. Mostert believes so strongly in the influence of the navy and of naval power, that he credits naval warfare as the guiding mechanism behind the history surrounding the Napoleonic Era.²¹

Methodology and Primary Sources

This work combines much of the opinions of the aforementioned authors, and also includes some important primary source material. *The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* was the defining document of the French Revolution and helps to explain how the Revolution destroyed the aristocracy. The letters and diaries of various officers are also important, specifically those of Admirals Nelson and Collingwood. Perhaps the only deficiency to be found here is a lack of French sources, as those were difficult to obtain, especially in translated form.

In conducting the research for this project, it was obvious that the documents of the Revolution itself would be paramount in explaining the destruction of the aristocracy. The aforementioned *Declaration* was the most important and the *Decrees on Feudalism* and execution of the King support the destructive path that the Revolution was taking. Connecting that path to the French Navy required considerable secondary research, as well as tying in first-hand accounts from battles, in the form of diaries or maps.

Many satirical cartoons were produced during the Napoleonic Era, and they were useful in establishing what the popular consensus about Napoleon was outside of France. They also defined the impotence of some of Napoleon's policies, especially his counter blockade. The

²¹ N. Mostert. *The Line Upon a Wind: An Intimate History of the Last and Greatest War Fought at Sea Under Sail, 1793-1815*. (London: Vintage, 2008), 3.

works of George Woodward are discussed here including “The Continental Dockyard” and “Blockade Against Blockade or John Bull a Match for Boney”.

Disunity and Mutiny

Disunity led to serious problems among the French command. Whereas the British Royal Navy enjoyed a cohesive and capable command structure, the French lacked an equivalent. The ranks of the British Admiralty were based upon ability and distinction; the French gave promotions to the rank of Admiral out as though they were retirement benefits or rewards for long service. The issues with this system left many of the heroes of the American Revolution out of service before they could contribute meaningfully to the French Revolutionary Navy. Too often, flag ranks²² were given to men who were too old and unfit to make effective fleet commanders.²³

The breakdown of discipline became a problem almost immediately. In 1789, arsenal workers in Toulon banded together and arrested the naval Commandant, Albert de Rioms, a direct representative of the King. The National Assembly did nothing to stop this action, as they were unprepared to support an officer of the King over the Revolutionaries. The Toulon Affair, as it became known, proved the dangers of the new ideas of popular sovereignty, as it showed that popular sovereignty was not confined only to the rulings of the National Assembly.²⁴ Pierre-Victor Malouet, a political philosopher from the Revolutionary era who spoke at length about the Toulon Affair, described the situation, noting that revolutionary thought was dangerous because

²² Flag ranks are those greater than the rank of Captain, in the navy. The rank of Vice Admiral, essentially a three-star admiral in common terms, was awarded without much concern for the officer’s personal health or capability during the French Revolutionary period.

²³ Ibid. 40-41

²⁴ Ibid. 77

“each part of the People believes itself to be the Nation and authorizes itself to exercise sovereignty.”²⁵

The breakdown continued the next year; a large-scale mutiny at Brest in 1790 was the result of the new policies of the Revolutionary government. The National Assembly made efforts before the mutiny to make the officer corps more egalitarian; instead all they did was further erode authority. The separation between officers of executive authority, and the will of the common sailor, became even more pronounced. In this case, the navy was left once again without support from the National Assembly, and with no place to appeal the loss of control. Following the Brest Mutiny, most of the old officer corps quit the service and fled the country the following year, disgusted that their authority was no longer valid.²⁶

Economics of Paying for the Napoleonic Wars

The Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars were incredibly costly for the British and French, straining the treasuries of both countries tremendously. The British and French each had their own method of financing the ongoing conflicts under Napoleon. Britain relied on borrowing, France relied on taxation. What made all the difference was each nation’s credibility as a debtor and its economy’s ability to sustain a particular level of spending. The Ancien Regime had destroyed France’s reputation, and the Revolutionary government had not alleviated that problem. Furthermore, Napoleon’s constant warfare made lenders hesitant to trust France’s intentions and ability to sustain their debt.²⁷

Throughout the eighteenth century each of these powers had their own method of managing borrowing and debt. For the British, the idea was to borrow during war time, and then

²⁵ Pierre-Victor Malouet. *Opinion de M. Malouet sur l’affaire de M. le comte d’Albert* (1789), 9. In *Revolution & Political Conflict in the French Navy 1789-1794*. W. S. Cormack, trans. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995): 77

²⁶ Cormack. *Revolution & Political Conflict*. 108-9

²⁷ Bordo and White. “A Tale of Two Currencies.” 303

increase taxes and pay down the debt during peace time. They were actually quite successful at this strategy, and established for themselves an excellent reputation as a debtor. The French were successful at a similar strategy for a time, but they were unable to manage money as effectively as the British. In 1759, the French government was unable to pay many of the debts it had acquired during the Seven Years War. Later, in 1770, the French government was struck with partial bankruptcy. They made efforts to be more fiscally responsible, but were ultimately unsuccessful in creating meaningful change. Eventually, the French were forced to borrow at far higher interest rates than the British, continually finding it difficult to make payments.²⁸

The trust issues only got worse as the nineteenth century dawned. The fall of the French Monarchy left a great deal of doubt in the minds of lenders about the French government's ability to keep its promises. The National Assembly and later the Directory tried many tactics to raise money to restore their reputation, including seizing and selling church land. They were partially successful, reducing interest payments on French debt from 260 million francs in 1788, to 75.3 million francs in 1799. Despite this progress the French could still not afford the cost of even the lesser amount. This left France with a bad reputation and difficulty financing the wars to come.²⁹

Ultimately, financing all came down to reputation, and France had ruined hers by squandering money, destroying her aristocracy, and killing her King. Britain was able to fund the Napoleonic Wars through borrowing and mild taxation. The French, on the other hand, had to go to extraordinary lengths to provide the necessary funds, taxing severely. Worse, Napoleon operated as an autocrat, and few were willing to loan to a despotic government that kept its finances secret. One of the few things sustaining France financially at all was the heavy taxes

²⁸ Ibid. 307-9

²⁹ Ibid. 310

they were forced to levy on their allies and in occupied territory. This, naturally, served to anger those whom Napoleon had subjugated.³⁰

Alliances and Numerical Advatage

The problems facing the Revolutionary Navy were long in development, and could probably have been foreseen for some time. The British held a tremendous numerical advantage over the French, in terms of numbers of ships. This advantage had been building since the days of the American Revolution. It is also important to remember that the French had a much larger and effective coalition of allies during the American Revolution as well. In that conflict the fleets of France, Spain, and the Netherlands were all poised against Britain, straining the Royal Navy's numerical advantage. The navies of those nations were not able to keep pace with Britain by the Napoleonic Era, however.³¹

The strength of the French Alliance during the American Revolution had faded by the time of the battles of the French Revolution. The fleets of Spain and the Netherlands had each deteriorated in power by the time of the Revolution. Spain faced problems with the crews of its ships and their training, while the Dutch fielded a fleet, which was largely obsolete and had a command, which was indecisive. Also, the British fleet had continued to grow since the American Revolution, and where once they outnumbered the French only five to four, by the time of the French Revolution outnumbered them by a ratio of two to one, and eventually three to one. The Spanish and Dutch fleets served as little more than a distraction for the British, but their effectiveness in even that regard was questionable.³²

Productive Capacity

³⁰ Ibid. 315-16

³¹ Dull, Jonathan R., and James S. Pritchard. "Why Did the French Revolutionary Navy Fail?." *Consortium On Revolutionary Europe 1750-1850: Proceedings* 19, (June 1989): 123-24.

³² Ibid. 125.

The French Navy's problems went beyond just numerical disadvantage and weak allies as well. Their dockyards were unable to keep up with production as the British were capturing or destroying French warships more quickly than they could be produced. Even with more ships, the French would have also faced serious problems with crewing and provisioning the additional forces. Manpower shortages were a common problem for the French and had been so since their heavy losses in the eighteenth century. Funds were also in short supply, and the enormous cost of fielding a fleet, which could contend with the British Royal Navy, was insurmountable.³³

The inability of the French to keep up with production of warships is amply demonstrated in a period drawing called "The Continental Dockyard". The image, which was created in Britain depicts the British and French dockyards across from one another, with Napoleon standing near the French dockyard, and John Bull standing near the British dockyard. Napoleon is demanding that the yard master work faster to produce new ships, while the yard master notes that it is pointless because the British are capturing new ships as fast as they can be constructed. John Bull jokes that the French are oversupplying the British, and that they need to slow down, as the British dockyards are becoming crowded with French ships. The French dockyard is also drawn in a shambles, representing the decaying state of the French fleet. The British dockyard, on the other hand, remains prosperous and is full of French ships.³⁴

Productive capacity was also hampered by a lack of resources. Navies run on timber, and that resource had been in short supply for decades, both for the French and the British. The American War of Independence severely cut down the timber supply available to Britain, while Americans were only too happy to sell their timber to the French. The last shipment of American

³³ Ibid. 127-28.

³⁴ Woodward, George. *The Continental Dockyard*. (London: Thomas Tegg, 1807).

timber to Britain arrived just after Bunker Hill, in 1775. This left the British with the necessity of seeking out alternate supply lines. The Baltic States and Canada were an insufficient substitute.³⁵

By the time of the Napoleonic Wars, however, the British had developed Canada into a timber-producing powerhouse. Canada's supply of oak and pine was even greater than that of the Thirteen Colonies, and in the years between the American Revolution and the beginning of the Napoleonic Wars, Britain had increased Canada's industrial capacity significantly. Holding back the British was the fact that Napoleon controlled much of the European continent, preventing trade with the Baltic; this was alleviated by Canada's new productive capacity.³⁶

In the end, Britain achieved the advantage in timber. Britain's timber capacity was strained by having too many ships on station at the same time but the vast colonial supplies they had access to alleviated this problem. The French had access only to continental timber supplies and were forced to move them from the far reaches of their empire, across occupied territory. Leading up to the Battle of Trafalgar, Admiral Collingwood of the Royal Navy reported that there "was only a copper sheet³⁷ between us and eternity."³⁸

Command – Strategy and Tactics

Strategy and tactics also play an important part in the carrying out of any conflict, and in this regard the French had a number of failures as well. The center of French strategy was to remain a threat, but to refuse to engage the British, even with an advantage. The French ships remained in port for much of the war, and therefore a constant threat, but they also contributed

³⁵ Albion, R. G. *Forests and Sea Power: The Timber Problem of the Royal Navy, 1652-1862*. (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1965): 283-4

³⁶ Ibid. 346.

³⁷ In the Eighteenth Century, Britain began coppering the parts of warships' hulls that were underwater. This helped to prevent damage caused by salt water and corrosion. This allowed Britain to keep its ships at sea for longer periods than any other nation, but it was incredibly expensive. By the time of the Napoleonic Wars, the entire British fleet had been fitted with copper plating.

³⁸ Collingwood. *Correspondence of Lord Collingwood*, (Oct. 1805) In *Forests and Sea Power: The Timber Problem of the Royal Navy, 1652-1862*. Albion, R. G. ed. (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1965): 377

little to the actual war effort. Another issue for the French was the tactics they employed in battle. The British aimed to render ships defenseless, by targeting the hull and destroying gun batteries. The French, however, chose instead to direct their efforts towards capturing enemy vessels, often resulting in them having done little damage to enemy ships, while sustaining tremendous damage themselves.³⁹

The core of officers available to each nation also favored the British. Many British officers were veterans of the American Revolution, and were spending their time at home, waiting for an opportunity to go to sea and regain full pay. The French, on the other hand, had purged many of their officers thanks to the actions of the revolutionary government, and many of those that survived had fled the country. As members of the aristocracy, they had just cause to fear remaining in France. The French rebuilt their naval command not by selecting those who were most experienced or prepared for the positions, but rather by selecting those who were appropriately patriotic. As a result, the few competent French officers who remained refused to go to sea. A side effect of the French strategy to remain in port was that the British officers only became more capable, while French officers idled in port.⁴⁰

Heavy losses also hampered the efforts of the French Navy. By the end of the Battle of Trafalgar, the French had lost an enormous number of ships, far more than the British. The British had also succeeded in capturing many of these ships, bolstering their forces at the expense of the French. The French lost a total of 377 ships, until Trafalgar ended their naval aspirations, while the British lost only 101, and only 10 of those in battle. Of the 377 ships the French lost, 245 were put into service in the British fleet, including a number of the largest ships

³⁹ Kristof, John J. "The Royal Navy's Defeat of the French at Sea in the Years 1793-1815." *Naval War College Review* 25, no. 4 (March 1973), 41-42.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 43.

in the French navy. Lost along with the ships were thousands of sailors, the French having suffered nearly 39,000 casualties compared to the British's nearly 6,000.⁴¹

Blockades

The British blockades were highly effective at keeping French forces trapped as well. During the blockade of Brest, only a few French ships were able to run the blockades, and their numbers were too limited to pose a threat to the Royal Navy. Brest was the most strictly blockaded port in France; other ports were far easier for the French to escape from, though even those instances were rare. The intense blockade allowed the British to see just how effective their naval advantage really was, and much of the French fleet fell into disrepair and eventually surrendered.⁴²

The aforementioned British blockade of the European continent was disastrous for the French economy and proved remarkably effective in cutting off supply and trade from overseas. Napoleon's response was to declare a counter blockade of his own, but with his navy leaderless, his efforts were largely toothless. Napoleon strictly forbade all trade with Britain, declaring that any cargo or letter bound for Britain or written in English would be seized immediately. The failures of his navy meant that he had no real way to enforce this policy, however.⁴³

The British found the policy amusing and realized quickly that it was entirely ineffective. George Woodward, a satirical cartoonist drew "Blockade Against Blockade or John Bull a Match for Boney" as a response. It depicts the British John Bull poking fun at Napoleon's blockade,

⁴¹ Ibid. 44-45.

⁴² Morriss, Roger. *The Channel Fleet and the Blockade of Brest, 1793-1801*. (Aldershot, Hants, England ; Burlington, VT: Published by Ashgate for the Navy Records Society, 2001.) 621-623.

⁴³ "The Berlin Decrees, 21 November 1806". In *The French Revolution and Napoleon: A Sourcebook*. Dwyer, P.G. and Peter McPhee, eds. (London: Routledge, 2002): 161-163.

stating that he will continue to enjoy his roast beef, while Napoleon has only soup. Clearly, the satirist was not the least bit concerned about loss of supply due to a French blockade.⁴⁴

Revolution and the Army

Before examining the defeats of the French Navy in two major battles, the question should be addressed as to why the Revolution affected the French Navy so dramatically but did not have the same effect on the French Army. Simply put, this was because the French Nation was concerned primarily with keeping the army intact and supplied, while the navy was left to their own devices. The army was the honorable calling and the navy was the prison sentence that nobody wanted, as mentioned earlier.

The French conscription policies clearly define how little the government was concerned with the navy. They explicitly directed all manpower and materiel to the army, ignoring the needs of the navy. The conscription decree, on 24 February 1793, directed the conscription of 300,000 men. Those men were to be placed in the army, and the men who did not get conscripted were to provide materiel for the supply of the army. No mention was made of supplying the navy, despite its tremendous manpower and supply shortages. Clearly, the navy was unimportant to the government even at this early stage, which is unfortunate as with proper manpower and supplies they would have been much more effective.⁴⁵

Case Studies – The Battle of the Nile and The Battle of Trafalgar

The two most defining battles of the French Navy during the Napoleonic Era were the Battle of the Nile and the Battle of Trafalgar and both present excellent case studies on the effects of the loss of command. Both were losses for the French, and were extremely influential

⁴⁴ Woodward, George. *Blockade Against Blockade or John Bull a Match for Boney*. (London: Thomas Tegg, 1807).

⁴⁵ “Decree Conscribing 300,000 Men, 24 February 1793”. In *The French Revolution and Napoleon: A Sourcebook*. Dwyer, P.G. and Peter McPhee, eds. (London: Routledge, 2002): 92-93.

in weakening the French Navy. The Battle of the Nile was the first of the two great disasters and will be examined here first. Trafalgar was the final, decisive naval battle of the age, and will be examined after the Nile. All the aforementioned reasons contributed to the losses in each battle.

By July of 1798, Napoleon had secured his possession of Egypt, and a French fleet had arrived to unload arms, personnel, and equipment. The fleet was under the command of Admiral Brueys, one of the few aristocrats to maintain his position, whom Napoleon had personally requested to lead the fleet. Quickly, Brueys and Napoleon began to clash; many of the ships in the fleet were large warships, ill-suited to navigating the narrow harbors of Alexandria. The warships carried many heavy guns and Napoleon was insistent that they be close at hand should the British fleet, under Nelson, move to attack while they were unloading. Napoleon's overruling of Brueys would be the first major mistake leading up to the Battle of the Nile.⁴⁶

Brueys did the best he could to prepare his ships for a defensive engagement in Aboukir Bay, but he overlooked some key issues. First, his ships were anchored only at the bow, which meant that they were susceptible to the winds, and would often be moved in rotation without the consent of their crews, they were essentially out of control in terms of which direction they would be facing. Furthermore, Napoleon had stripped the warships of many of their supplies, so that they could be used for the operations of the army. Also, the French ships were positioned such that an enemy fleet could easily move in between the ships and fire on their bows and sterns with little risk to themselves. Brueys seems to have been too busy to address these failings, and was rendered rather impotent by a lack of supplies in any case.⁴⁷

A few short days after Brueys established his defensive line, he was discovered by the British fleet. Nelson moved immediately to plan his attack, sparing the French fleet only a few

⁴⁶ Adkins, Roy & Lesley Adkins. *The War for All the Oceans: From Nelson at the Nile to Napoleon at Waterloo*. (New York: Viking, 2007.) 20-21.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 23.

short moments to prepare a defense. The French defense had to be prepared with ships that were undersupplied and undermanned, and were also effectively stuck in place, as the British fleet had the advantage of the wind. In terms of numbers of guns the French actually had the advantage, especially when including shore batteries. However, the British had the weather gauge,⁴⁸ and Brueys had failed to identify a critical error in his defensive line: British Captain Thomas Foley of the *Goliath* noticed that the French ships were in a line, which he deduced meant that there must be a deep channel beneath their position to prevent them running aground. Using this channel, the British fleet could actually sail past the French and attack them from both sides. Furthermore, Brueys had not anticipated such a tactic, and his shore batteries were non-operational. Finally, the French ships at the end of the line were completely opposed to the wind in positioning, and thus could not make any kind of move to defend themselves.⁴⁹

The British tactics worked perfectly, and many British ships were able to move and anchor in between the French ships. As predicted, many French ships were unable to return fire, as the wind had forced them into positions where their guns had no sight of the enemy, and they were being attacked from positions where they had no guns for defense. The entire British fleet could not fit between the French lines and some ships engaged more directly. Nelson moved his flagship to engage the French flagship, and succeeded in doing tremendous damage, he getting wounded. The wound was not serious, and he walked away from the Battle of the Nile.⁵⁰

The Battle of the Nile proceeded for the entire next day, and into the day after that. The French simply refused to surrender; despite the battering their fleet was taking. By the third day, August 3, 1798, only a handful of French ships remained in the battle. The British fleet had taken

⁴⁸ Having the weather gauge represents having the advantage of wind in such a way that a fleet commander has the option of attacking the enemy or retreating, without the enemy being able to respond as their wind is insufficient to force an engagement or to escape.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 24-25.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 28-30.

considerable damage, but was still quite capable of carrying on the fight. Rear Admiral Villeneuve realized that his fleet was losing and withdrew his ship and two frigates, the British fleet was battered and in no position to stop Villeneuve's relatively undamaged ship, Nelson would engage Villeneuve again in an even more important battle. Shortly after Villeneuve's departure, the remaining French ships surrendered. The ultimate results of the battle were disastrous for the French.⁵¹

The French fleet suffered far greater losses than their British attackers. The French lost 5,235 men, killed or missing, and a further 3,305 men taken prisoner. The British suffered only 218 killed and 677 wounded. Worse still, the Battle of the Nile became a tremendous propaganda victory for the British, and a horrible defeat for Napoleon. The battle marked the first truly major setback Napoleon faced up until that point. His invincible image was tarnished forever, and he and his army were trapped in Egypt. Nelson became a hero to the British people, and King George III granted him peerage, as the Baron of the Nile. Nelson was also rewarded for his efforts by the East India Trading Company and the Ottoman Empire; his victory made him a wealthy lord and a hero to many, not just the British. In a tragic irony, Nelson was also given a coffin made from the hull of the French flagship *L'Orient*, by one of his subordinates; a coffin he would be placed in a few years later.⁵²

The Battle of Trafalgar itself was the deciding naval conflict of the European theatre of the war. It occurred on 21 October 1805, and there was a great deal of build up toward the final confrontation. Napoleon's idea behind the moves leading up to Trafalgar was to slip the British blockade with the French fleet, then sail to the Caribbean and unite with the Spanish fleet, then the combined fleets would make their way back to Europe and launch an invasion of Britain

⁵¹ Ibid. 37

⁵² Ibid. 38

itself. The French went to the Caribbean because so many Spanish ships were based there, and because they lacked the numbers for a direct confrontation with the British blockade fleets. French Admiral Villeneuve was successful in slipping the blockade and making his way to the Caribbean, British Admiral Lord Nelson was in pursuit.⁵³

Trafalgar was not the first time the British feared a French invasion of their isles. Several years before Trafalgar, during the blockade of Brest, the British seemed to have been convinced that the French were attempting to prepare an invasion of Ireland. In a letter written to Admiral Bridport, the importance of stopping any French notions of invasion was stressed sharply. Bridport was ordered “to be ready to move at a short warning if it should be necessary.” The same note put the timetable for any invasion as early as March, 1799.⁵⁴

Nelson chased Villeneuve to the Caribbean and back, missing the French fleet a number of times. The British admiralty then dispatched Admiral Calder to intercept and destroy Villeneuve’s fleet. Calder was partially successful; he engaged and defeated Villeneuve, escaping with two captured ships. He failed to press the attack however, and was eventually court-martialed for failing to capitalize on his victory. Villeneuve retreated to Cadiz, where he was promptly blockaded by British Admirals Collingwood and Calder.⁵⁵

Upon hearing that the French were trapped in Cadiz, Admiral Lord Nelson immediately returned to sea and took command of Collingwood and Calder’s fleets. He felt he was welcomed into his new command, writing, “I believe my arrival was most welcome, not only to the Commander of the Fleet, but also to every individual in it, and, when I came to explain to them

⁵³ Von Pivka, Otto. *Navies of the Napoleonic Era*. (Newton Abbot, Devon : New York: David & Charles ; Hippocrene Books, 1980.) 92-93.

⁵⁴ Spencer. “Letter to Bridport.” (March 19, 1799.) In *The Channel Fleet and the Blockade of Brest, 1793-1801*. Morriss, Roger. (Aldershot, Hants, England ; Burlington, VT: Published by Ashgate for the Navy Records Society, 2001.) 354.

⁵⁵ Von Pivka. *Navies of the Napoleonic Era*. 94-95.

the 'Nelson touch,' it was like an electric shock.” Clearly, the problems of command and mutiny that plagued the French simply didn’t exist in the Royal Navy.⁵⁶

Nelson understood that the essential goal of the naval blockade was to force the French fleet to go to sea. To that end, he encouraged rocket attacks and other methods of harassing the French, making Cadiz as he wrote, “so very disagreeable, that they would rather risk an Action than remain in Port.”⁵⁷

Much of the British advantage was built upon the fortunes of the weather. The wind favored Nelson before the battle and throughout it. On the night before the battle he wrote a number of entries in his diary describing the advantageous position in which he had found his fleet. “Communicated with Phoebe, Defence, and Colossus, who saw near forty Sail of Ships of War outside of Cadiz yesterday evening; but the wind being Southerly, they could not get to the Mouth of the Straits,” Nelson wrote. The combined French and Spanish fleets were unable to make any kind of secret escape, because of the weather factors involved.⁵⁸

It was not until the next morning, in broad daylight, that the combined fleet could move. Nelson was prepared for them however, any hope of surprise had been ruined by the night’s weather. He wrote, “At daylight saw the Enemy's Combined Fleet from East to E.S.E.; bore away; made the signal for Order of Sailing, and to Prepare for Battle; the Enemy with their heads to the Southward: at seven the Enemy wearing in succession.” He had the advantage of watching the combined fleet and also was able to attack them at a time and place of his choosing.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Nelson, Horatio. “Letter to Lady Hamilton.” (Oct. 1, 1805.)
http://www.wtj.com/archives/nelson/1805_10a.htm

⁵⁷ Nelson, Horatio. “Letter to Viscount Castlereagh, Secretary for the War Department.” (Oct. 1, 1805.)
http://www.wtj.com/archives/nelson/1805_10a.htm

⁵⁸ Nelson, Horatio. *Private Diary: Entry of October 20, 1805.* (Oct. 20, 1805.)
http://www.wtj.com/archives/nelson/1805_10e.htm

⁵⁹ Nelson, Horatio. *Private Diary: Entry of October 21, 1805.* (Oct. 21, 1805.)
http://www.wtj.com/archives/nelson/1805_10e.htm

In the meantime, Napoleon had lost confidence in Villeneuve and was seeking to replace him. As a desperate measure to preserve his position, Villeneuve decided to attack the British blockade. Nelson was prepared and battle ensued. Nelson, had the advantage of position and the wind, and was able to attack the French at a time and place of his choosing. His attack was highly successful, with no losses to his own ships of the line; he managed to sink or capture the majority of the French and Spanish ships, including the flagships of each fleet. Nelson died during the battle but he managed to secure British naval supremacy for the rest of the war.⁶⁰

Conclusion

Trafalgar sealed the fate of Napoleon's navy, and ended any hope he may have ever had of truly securing his control of the European continent. Never again could he challenge the British Empire; the Battle of Waterloo served to put the nail in the coffin. Still, it should not be assumed that the French Navy was incapable or incompetent; they were a powerful force, which the British were very concerned about. In the end, they were simply overwhelmed by all the forces arrayed against them.

The new political reality brought on by the French Revolution had eroded discipline within the navy severely, and left many officers either afraid to take command, or not truly capable of doing so. Popular sovereignty and common will had taken the place of respect and merit, leaving the navy bereft of its best officers, precisely when they were needed the most. The new reality also left an inconsistent command structure and an indecisive strategic plan.

Beyond the structure of command, the new political ideology also sparked mutinies and dissention. On several occasions, those most fit to command were removed because their subordinates simply did not want to follow their orders, or do as the navy required for their ships

⁶⁰ Pivka. *Navies of the Napoleonic Era*. 95-101.

to be most effective. No military force can be effective without the discipline that they require to function properly.

Furthermore, economics played a great role in the French Navy's failure. France had difficulty adequately supplying and paying for their ships. The deficiency in supplies, money, and manpower existed well before the Napoleonic Wars, but was severely exacerbated by them. Napoleon had also squandered what little was left of France's reputation with his constant warfare throughout Europe, making it difficult for France to secure loans or be trusted with foreign assistance. Furthermore, the failure of the navy meant that foreign supplies would have been difficult to receive in any case.

France also had difficulty keeping up with Britain in terms of tactics and strategy as the Napoleonic Wars progressed. Despite their successes only a few years earlier, during the American Revolution, France's Navy was crippled by the changes brought about by the French Revolution. The British expertly countered French tactics, and their overall strategy left the French navy trapped in port, blockaded and unable to seek foreign supplies. Individual battles saw the French defeated time and again, until all hope of victory at sea was lost at Trafalgar.

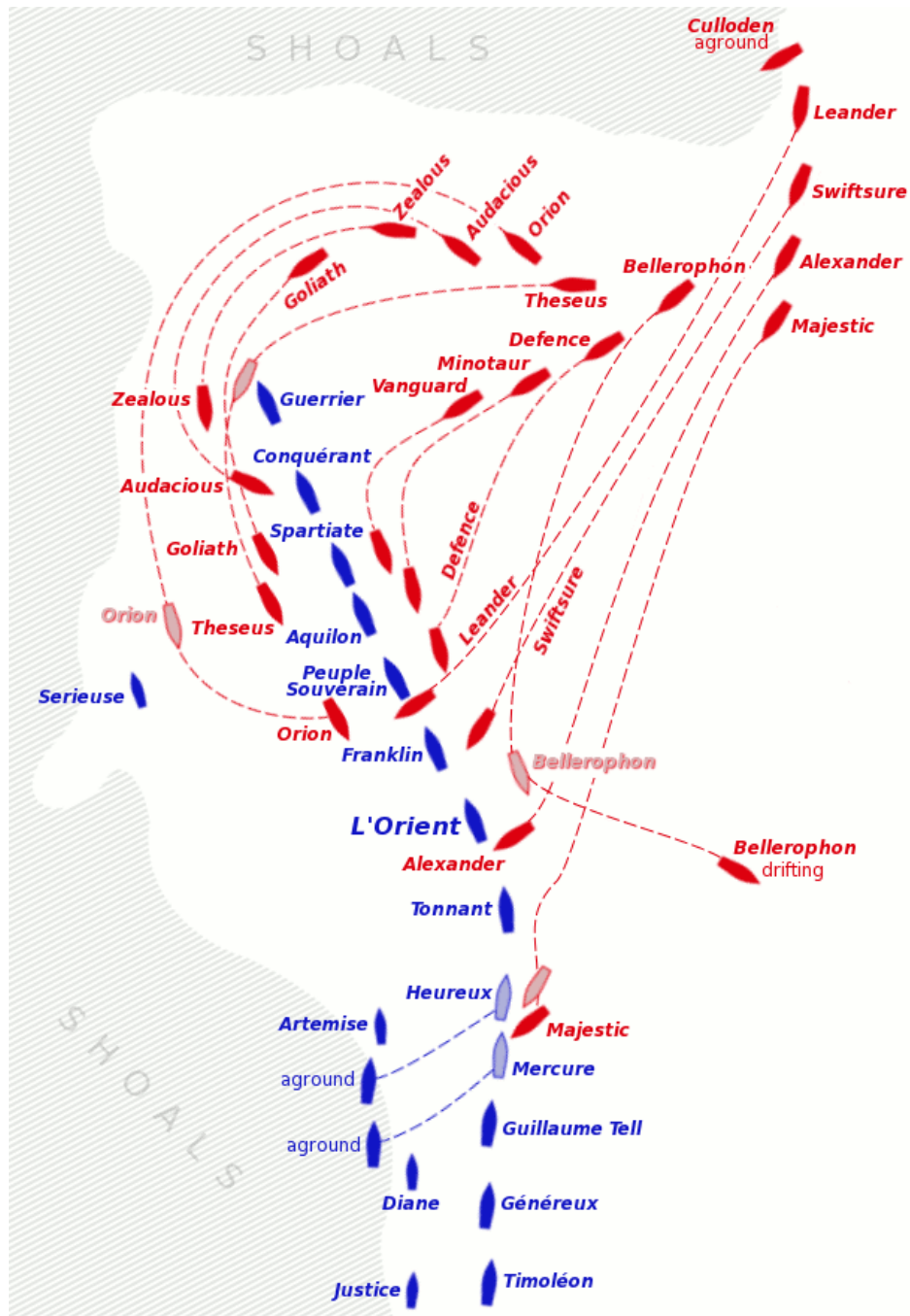
The British faced many problems of their own as well. They had difficulty keeping their massive fleet afloat, while trying to maintain a continent wide blockade. Still, whatever issues the British had, they still had capable officers with enough able ships to be useful. Their advantages at sea brought them victory, though at great cost with the loss of a national hero and tremendous debt.

In the end, it should not be thought that the French were in the position of an inevitable defeat; rather they were a capable force that was overwhelmed by many outside forces, and the disintegration of their command structures especially. The failure of the French Navy was the

greatest hindrance to Napoleon's plans for the continent, more so even than his eventual army defeats.

Appendix

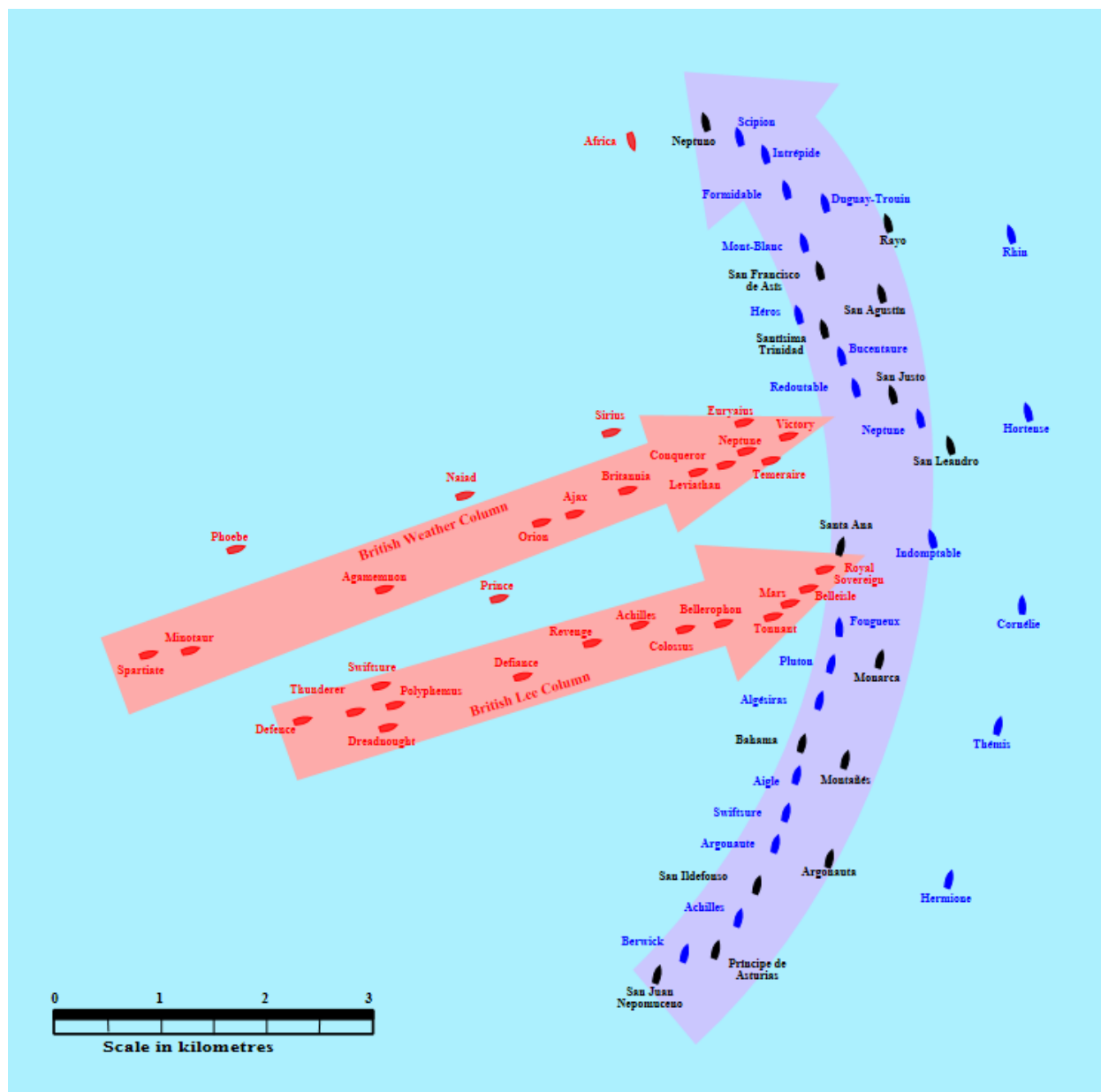
The Battle of The Nile



British ships are displayed in red.

French ships are displayed in blue.

The Battle of Trafalgar



British ships are red.

French ships are blue.

Spanish ships are black.

The Continental Dockyard



Woodward del.

THE CONTINENTAL DOCKYARD

London Pub^d Nov^r 27th 1807 by Tho^s Tegg.
No^o 111 Cheapside

Blockade Against Blockade or John Bull a Match for Boney



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